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# *Tearoom Trade*

IMPERSONAL SEX  
IN PUBLIC PLACES



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TO MY WIFE, NANCY, AND MY CHILDREN, CLAIR AND DAVID,  
WHOSE ENCOURAGEMENT AND LOVE MADE THIS RESEARCH  
POSSIBLE

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To protect respondents, the names of persons, automobiles, streets, and parks and other identifying tags have been changed in the transcripts in this book.

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# Chapter 1. Public Settings for "Private" Encounters

While the agreements resulting in "one-night-stands" occur in many settings—the bath, the street, the public toilet—and may vary greatly in the elaborateness or simplicity of the interaction preceding culmination in the sexual act, their essential feature is the expectation that sex can be had without obligation or commitment.<sup>1</sup>

AT SHORTLY after five o'clock on a weekday evening, four men enter a public restroom in the city park. One wears a well-tailored business suit; another wears tennis shoes, shorts, and teeshirt; the third man is still clad in the khaki uniform of his filling station; the last, a salesman, has loosened his tie and left his sports coat in the car. What has caused these men to leave the company of other homeward-bound commuters on the freeway? What common interest brings these men, with their divergent backgrounds, to this public facility?

They have come here not for the obvious reason, but in a search for "instant sex." Many men—married and unmarried, those with

1. Evelyn Hooker, "Male Homosexuals and Their 'Worlds,'" in Judd Marmor, ed., *Sexual Inversion* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), p. 97.

heterosexual identities and those whose self-image is a homosexual one—seek such impersonal sex, shunning involvement, desiring kicks without commitment. Whatever reasons—social, physiological, or psychological—might be postulated for this search, the phenomenon of impersonal sex persists as a widespread but rarely studied form of human interaction.

There are several settings for this type of deviant activity—the balconies of movie theaters, automobiles, behind bushes—but few offer the advantages for these men that public restrooms provide. “Tearooms,” as these facilities are called in the language of the homosexual subculture,<sup>2</sup> have several characteristics that make them attractive as locales for sexual encounters without involvement.

According to its most precise meaning in the argot, the only “true” tearoom is one that gains a reputation as a place where homosexual encounters occur. Presumably, any restroom could qualify for this distinction, but comparatively few are singled out for this function at any one time. For instance, I have researched a metropolitan area with more than ninety public toilets in its parks, only twenty of which are in regular use as locales for sexual games. Restrooms thus designated join the company of automobiles and bathhouses as places for deviant sexual activity second only to private bedrooms in popularity.<sup>3</sup> During certain seasons of the year—roughly, that period from April through October that midwestern homosexuals call “the hunting season”—tearooms may surpass any other locale of homoerotic enterprise in volume of activity.

Public restrooms are chosen by those who want homoerotic activity without commitment for a number of reasons. *They are ac-*

2. Like most other words in the homosexual vocabulary, the origin of *tearoom* is unknown. British slang has used “tea” to denote “urine.” Another British usage is as a verb, meaning “to engage with, encounter, go in against.” See John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, *A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English* (London: George Rutledge & Sons, 1921).

3. It is not possible to know how many sexual acts are performed in the various types of settings. Writers on the homosexual subculture agree, in general, on the relative popularity of these locales. For general surveys of the homosexual scene, see especially Evelyn Hooker, “The Homosexual Community,” in *Personality Research* (Copenhagen: Monksgaard, 1962), pp. 40–59; and Maurice Leznoff and William A. Westley, “The Homosexual Community,” *Social Problems*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (April, 1965), pp. 257–263.

*cessible, easily recognized by the initiate, and provide little public visibility.* Tearooms thus offer the advantages of both public and private settings. They are available and recognizable enough to attract a large volume of potential sexual partners, providing an opportunity for rapid action with a variety of men. When added to the relative privacy of these settings, such features enhance the impersonality of the sheltered interaction.

### Availability

In the first place, tearooms are readily accessible to the male population. They may be located in any sort of public gathering place: department stores, bus stations, libraries, hotels, YMCA’s, or courthouses. In keeping with the drive-in craze of American society, however, the more popular facilities are those readily accessible to the roadways. The restrooms of public parks and beaches—and, more recently, the rest stops set at programmed intervals along superhighways—are now attracting the clientele that, in a more pedestrian age, frequented great buildings of the inner cities. As will be explained in Chapter 2, my research is focused on the activity that takes place in the restrooms of public parks, not only because (with some seasonal variation) they provide the most action but also because of other factors that make them suitable for sociological study.

It is a function of some societies to make these facilities for elimination available to the public. Perhaps the public toilet is one of the marks of “civilization,” at least as perceived by European and post-European culture. I recall a letter from a sailor stationed in North Africa during World War II in which he called the people “uncivilized” because they had no public restrooms and used streets and gutters for the purpose of elimination.

For the cultural historian, American park restrooms merit study as physical traces of modern civilization. The older ones are often appended to pavilions or concealed beneath the paving of graceful colonnades. One marble-lined room in which I have done research occupies half of a Greek temple-like structure, a building of beautiful lines and proportions. A second type, built before the Great

Depression, are the toilet facilities located in park administration buildings, maintenance shops, or garages. For the most part, these lack the artistic qualities of the first type. Partly because they are not as accessible from the roads and partly because they are too easily approached by supervisory personnel and other interfering "straights," these restrooms enjoy homosexual popularity only during the months when other outlets are closed.

With the depression of the 1930's a new variety of public toilet appeared on the park scene. Ten of the twelve tearooms in which I made systematic observations (see Chapter 2) were of this category. Although the floor plans and building materials used vary from city to city, the majority of restrooms I have seen were constructed during this period. These have been built by the Work Projects Administration and, in any one community, seem to have been stamped from the same die. In the city where most of my research took place, they are constructed of a native white stone with men's and women's facilities back-to-back under one red roof. They have heavy wooden doors, usually screened from public view by a latticework partition attached to the building's exterior. In most of these doors, there is an inset of opaque French panes.

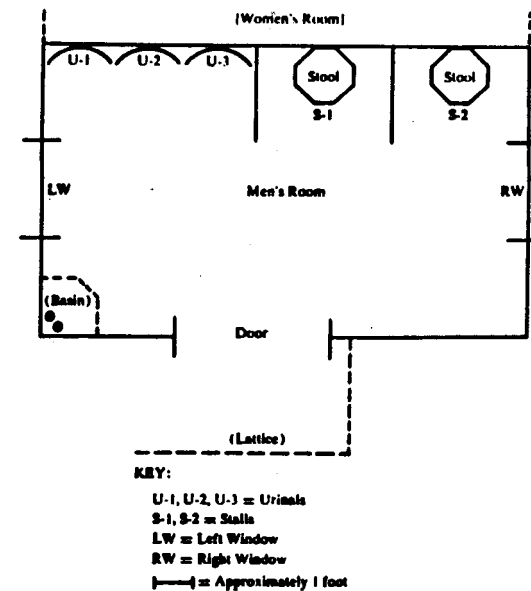
Each of the toilet facilities in the building has two windows of the same opaque glass, situated at either side of the room. The outside of these apertures is always covered with heavy screen. Against the blank wall opposite the door there are (from left to right) three urinals and two stalls, although smaller restrooms may provide only two urinals and one stall. Some of the facilities still have wash basins intact, situated in the corner to the left as one enters the door, but few of these are in working order. There is an occasional wastebasket. Paper towels are seldom provided, and there are no other furnishings in the rooms (see Figure 1.1).

Few park restrooms date back to the 1940's, when the nation was concerned with building those other major outlets for homosexual activity, the military posts. Apparently, most public construction in the 1950's was connected with the rush to provide more athletic facilities—swimming pools, golf courses, skating rinks, and the like.

The past decade has witnessed the construction of new, functional, cement-block facilities. Most of these structures are located

along the expressways, but a number are appearing in the parks and playgrounds of our cities. These relief stations may be viewed as an expression of the current interest in urban planning: some replace buildings no longer fit for use; others are located on the newly created urban playgrounds; and the bulk accompany the nation's answer to problems of mass transportation. However one may interpret the new construction as a reflection of the course of American history, it should be a boon to the tearoom customers. Most of the newly built restrooms are isolated structures with ready access to the roads and thus meet the prime requisites of tearoom activity.

Figure 1.1  
Diagram of Typical Public Park Restroom



According to some older respondents, the real turning point for the tearoom trade arrived with the WPA. One man, who has been active in the homosexual subculture for more than forty years, puts it this way:

I suppose there has been such activity since the invention of plumbing. I first started out in one of those pavilion places. But the real fun began

during the depression. There were all those new buildings, easy to reach, and the automobile was really getting popular about then. . . . Suddenly, it just seemed like half the men in town met in the tearooms.

Not all of the new buildings were easy to reach, but those that were soon found popularity for homosexual activity. Tearoom ecology, like that of society at large, is highly affected by the location of transportation routes. Whether by accident or design, most large city parks are located close to major thoroughfares and freeways. Because the activity in tearooms reaches its peak at the close of the workday (see Figure 2.1), restrooms will draw more customers if located near principal commuting routes of the metropolitan area. The two facilities that I found to attract the greatest numbers for homosexual relations were adjacent to four-lane traffic arteries. All others in which any noteworthy amount of activity was observed were located within five minutes' driving time of the expressways that circle and cross the city.

### Locating the Action

There is a great deal of difference in the volumes of homosexual activity that these accommodations shelter. In some, one might wait for months before observing a deviant act (unless solitary masturbation is considered deviant). In others, the volume approaches orgasmic dimensions. One summer afternoon, for instance, I witnessed twenty acts of fellatio in the course of an hour while waiting out a thunderstorm in a tearoom. For one who wishes to participate in (or study) such activity, the primary consideration is one of finding where the action is.

Occasionally, tips about the more active places may be gained from unexpected sources. Early in my research, I was approached by a man (whom I later surmised to be a park patrolman in plain clothes) while waiting at the window of a tearoom for some patrons to arrive. After finishing his business at the urinal and exchanging some remarks about the weather (it had been raining), the man came abruptly to the point: "Look, fellow, if you're looking for sex, this isn't the place. We're clamping down on this park because of trouble with the niggers. Try the john at the northeast

corner of [Reagan] Park. You'll find plenty of action there." He was right. Some of my best observations were made at the spot he recommended. In most cases, however, I could only enter, wait, and watch—a method that was costly in both time and gasoline. After surveying a couple of dozen such rooms in this way, however, I became able to identify the more popular tearooms by observing certain physical evidence, the most obvious of which is the location of the facility. During the warm seasons, those restrooms that are isolated from other park facilities, such as administration buildings, shops, tennis courts, playgrounds, and picnic areas, are the more popular for deviant activity. The most active tearooms studied were all isolated from recreational areas, cut off by drives or lakes from baseball diamonds and picnic tables.

I have chosen the term "purlieu" (with its ancient meaning of land severed from a royal forest by perambulation) to describe the immediate environs best suited to the tearoom trade. Drives and walks that separate a public toilet from the rest of the park are almost certain guides to deviant sex. The ideal setting for homosexual activity is a tearoom situated on an island of grass, with roads close by on every side. The getaway car is just a few steps away; children are not apt to wander over from the playground; no one can surprise the participants by walking in from the woods or from over a hill; it is not likely that straight people will stop there at all. According to my observations, the women's side of these buildings is seldom used.

Active tearooms are also identifiable by the number of automobiles parked nearby. If two or more cars remain in front of a relatively isolated restroom for more than ten minutes, one may be reasonably certain that homosexual activity is in progress inside. This sign that the sexual market is in operation is an important one to the participants, who seldom enter a park restroom unless the presence of other unoccupied cars indicates that potential partners are inside. A lone arriver will usually wait in his auto until at least one other has parked nearby. That this signal is obscured when a golf course, zoo, or other facility that draws automobiles is located in close proximity may help explain the popularity of the isolated restroom.

Another means of recognizing the active tearoom requires closer

inspection. Here, I refer to the condition of the windows and doors. Men who play the tearoom game must be able to know when someone is approaching. A door that squeaks or sticks is of great assistance; however, the condition of the windows is even more important. If they are of opaque glass, are nailed shut, or have no broken panes, the researcher may presume that the facility is seldom used for homosexual encounters.

In a western city, I have observed an exception to this rule. One of the popular meeting places there was a restroom located beneath the pavement of a colonnade. There were vents but no windows. The only access to this tearoom, however, was by means of a circular, metal stairway, and clanging footfalls could be heard well before the intruder was far enough down to see into the room. Normally, popular tearooms have at least one pane broken from each window, unless the windows have been opened. Fragments of glass that remain between the window frame and an outside screen are indicative of destruction that was initiated from within the restroom rather than by outside vandals. As the account of a teen-age attack in Chapter 5 indicates, occasional damage to the buildings comes from outside. But one of the first acts of participants after the spring opening or renovation of a facility is to break out a few carefully selected panes so that insiders can see who is approaching.

Graffiti were expected to provide some indication of restroom usage for deviant activity. On the basis of quantity alone, however, inscriptions vary most directly with the time since the latest repainting or cleansing of the walls or with the type of wall covering used. There also seems to be a relationship between the quantity of such markings and the neighborhood in which the facility is situated. Restrooms in lower class and commercial neighborhoods or close to schools tend to invite more of such writings than those in middle class or residential areas.

The type of graffiti found does correlate with use of the room for homosexual purposes. In the more active tearooms, I have often noticed inscriptions such as: "show hard—get sucked," "will suck cocks—10/12/66—all morning," or "I have eight inches—who wants it?" One respondent says that the presence of recent markings such as these reassures him that he has come to the right place for action. Active homosexual locales are conspicuously lacking in

initials, sketches of nude females, poetry, and certain of the more classic four-letter words. Writings on the walls of the true tearooms are straightforward, functional messages, lacking the fantasy content of the graffiti in most men's rooms. Moreover, this research suggests that involvement in homosexual encounters may preclude the leisure time necessary for some of the more creative types of graffiti production.

## Volume and Variety

The availability of facilities they can recognize attracts a great number of men who wish, for whatever reason, to engage in impersonal homoerotic activity. Simple observation is enough to guide these participants, the researcher, and, perhaps, the police to active tearooms. It is much more difficult to make an accurate appraisal of the proportion of the male population who engage in such activity over a representative length of time. Even with good sampling procedures, a large staff of assistants would be needed to make the observations necessary for an adequate census of this mobile population.<sup>4</sup> All that may be said with some degree of certainty is that the percentage of the male population who participate in tearoom sex in the United States is somewhat less than the 16 per cent of the adult white male population Kinsey found to have "at least as much of the homosexual as the heterosexual in their histories."<sup>5</sup>

4. By estimating (a) the average daily frequency of sex acts in each of twenty restrooms observed and (b) the average number of automobiles suspected of having been parked by participants near restrooms in five different parks, I have concluded that approximately 5 per cent of the adult male population of the metropolitan area under study are involved in these encounters in a year's time. The imprecision of the methods used in obtaining this "guesstimate" does not warrant elaboration.

5. Alfred C. Kinsey and others, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948), pp. 650–651. See also William Simon and John H. Gagnon, "Homosexuality: The Formulation of a Sociological Perspective," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (September, 1967), p. 180: "About one half [of the male homosexuals studied] reported that sixty percent or more of their sexual partners were persons with whom they had sex only one time. Between ten and twenty percent report that they often picked up their sexual partners in public terminals, and an even larger proportion reported similar contacts in other public or semipublic locations."

Participants assure me that it is not uncommon in tearooms for one man to fellate as many as ten others in a day. I have personally watched a fellator take on three men in succession in a half hour of observation. One respondent, who has cooperated with the researcher in a number of taped interviews, claims to average three men each day during the busy seasons.

I have seen some waiting turn for this type of service. Leaving one such scene on a warm September Saturday, I remarked to a man who left close behind me: "Kind of crowded in there, isn't it?" "Hell, yes," he answered. "It's getting so you have to take a number and wait in line in these places!"

There are many who frequent the same facility repeatedly. Men will come to be known as regular, even daily, participants, stopping off at the same tearoom on the way to or from work. One physician in his late fifties was so punctual in his appearance at a particular restroom that I began to look forward to our daily chats. This robust, affable respondent said he had stopped at this tearoom every evening of the week (except Wednesday, his day off) for years "for a blow-job." Another respondent, a salesman whose schedule is flexible, may "make the scene" more than once a day—usually at his favorite men's room. At the time of our formal interview, this man claimed to have had four orgasms in the past twenty-four hours.

According to participants I have interviewed, those who are looking for impersonal sex in tearooms are relatively certain of finding the sort of partner they want . . .

You go into the tearoom. You can pick up some really nice things in there. Again, it is a matter of sex real quick; and, if you like this kind, fine—you've got it. You get one and he is done; and, before long, you've got another one.

. . . when they want it:

Well, I go there; and you can always find someone to suck your cock, morning, noon, or night. I know lots of guys who stop by there on their way to work—and all during the day.

It is this sort of volume and variety that keeps the tearooms viable as market places of the one-night-stand variety.

Of the bar crowd in gay (homosexual) society, only a small percentage would be found in park restrooms. But this more overt, gay bar clientele constitutes a minor part of those in any American city who follow a predominantly homosexual pattern. The so-called closet queens and other types of covert deviants make up the vast majority of those who engage in homosexual acts—and these are the persons most attracted to tearoom encounters (see Chapter 6).

Tearooms are popular, not because they serve as gathering places for homosexuals but because they attract a variety of men, a *minority* of whom are active in the homosexual subculture. When we consider the types of participants, it will be seen that a large group of them have no homosexual self-identity. For various reasons, they do not want to be seen with those who might be identified as such or to become involved with them on a "social" basis.

### Privacy in Public

I have mentioned that one of the distinguishing traits of an active tearoom is its isolation from other facilities in a park. The addition of four picnic tables close to a once popular restroom all but eliminated that facility for research purposes. This portion of a tape, made as I toured the parks in search of action one April Sunday, is indicative of this ecological pattern:

This [park] is really dead! The tremendous volume of picnickers in all of the parks. . . . It seems like every family in the city is out today. It is a beautiful day, very warm, very pleasant. And everyone is out with their children. . . . The one facility in this park which is most active consistently is just completely surrounded by picnickers, and this would kill any gay activity. . . .

At this stage in the development of American culture, at least, some sort of privacy is requisite for sex. Whether deviant or "normal," sexual activity demands a degree of seclusion. Even orgies, I am told, require darkness or a minimum of light. When, as is the case with fellatio, the form of sexual engagement is prohibited, privacy decreases risk and is even more valued.

This constitutes a dilemma for those who would engage in im-

personal sex of this type: how to find a setting that is accessible and identifiable, that will provide the necessary volume and variety of participants, while preserving at least a minimum of privacy? The trysting place must not be too available for the undesired. It must not be identifiable by the uninitiated. The potential participant passing by should be able to perceive what is taking place inside, while those playing baseball across the way should remain ignorant of the sexual game behind tearoom walls.

Ecological factors, the tearoom purlieu, that separate these facilities from other activity in the public park, have already been discussed. The presence of walls and stalls and opaque windows also help preserve the needed privacy. But there is another aspect of the tearoom encounters that is crucial to the maintenance of privacy in public settings. I refer to the silence of the interaction.

Throughout most homosexual encounters in public restrooms, nothing is spoken. One may spend many hours in these buildings and witness dozens of sexual acts without hearing a word. Of fifty encounters on which I made extensive notes,<sup>6</sup> only fifteen included vocal utterances. The fifteen instances of speech break down as follows: Two were encounters in which I sought to ease the strain of legitimizing myself as lookout by saying, "You go ahead—I'll watch." Four were whispered remarks between sexual partners, such as, "Not so hard!" or "Thanks." One was an exchange of greetings between friends.

The other eight verbal exchanges were in full voice and more extensive, but they reflected an attendant circumstance that was exceptional. When a group of us were locked in a restroom and attacked by several youths, we spoke for defense and out of fear. (See Chapter 5 for an account of this siege.) This event ruptured the reserve among us and resulted in a series of conversations among those who shared this adventure for several days afterward. Gradually, this sudden unity subsided, and the encounters drifted back into silence.

6. Although I made fifty systematic observations of tearoom encounters, fifty-three acts of fellatio were observed at those times. The sexual acts sometimes occur in such rapid succession that it is impossible to report them as involving separate encounters. See the explanation of such "series encounters" in Chapter 4.

Barring such unusual events, an occasionally whispered "thanks" at the conclusion of the act constitutes the bulk of even a whispered communication. At first, I presumed that speech was avoided for fear of incrimination. The excuse that intentions have been misunderstood is much weaker when those proposals are expressed in words rather than signalled by body movements. As research progressed, however, it became evident that the privacy of silent interaction accomplishes much more than mere defense against exposure to a hostile world. Even when a careful lookout is maintaining the boundaries of an encounter against intrusion, the sexual participants tend to be silent. The mechanism of silence goes beyond satisfying the demand for privacy. Like all other characteristics of the tearoom setting, it serves to guarantee anonymity, to assure the impersonality of the sexual liaison.

Tearoom sex is distinctly less personal than any other form of sexual activity, with the single exception of solitary masturbation. More will be said of this in the concluding chapter of the book. For now, let me indicate only what I mean by "less personal": simply, that there is less emotional and physical involvement in restroom fellatio—less, even, than in the furtive action that takes place in autos and behind bushes. In those instances, at least, there is generally some verbal involvement. Often, in tearoom stalls, the only portions of the players' bodies that touch are the mouth of the insertee and the penis of the insertor; and the mouths of these partners seldom open for speech.

Only a public place, such as a park restroom, could provide the lack of personal involvement in sex that certain men desire. The setting fosters the necessary turnover in participants by its accessibility and visibility to the "right" men. In these public settings, too, there exists a sort of democracy that is endemic to impersonal sex. Men of all racial, social, educational, and physical characteristics meet in these places for sexual union. With the lack of involvement, personal preferences tend to be minimized.

If a person is going to entangle his body with another's in bed—or allow his mind to become involved with another mind—he will have certain standards of appearance, cleanliness, personality, or age that the prospective partner must meet. Age, looks, and other external variables are germane to the sexual action. As the amount

of anticipated contact of body and mind in the sex act decreases, so do standards expected of the partner. As one respondent told me:

I go to bed with gay people, too. But if I am going to bed with a gay person, I have certain standards that I prefer them to meet. And, in the tearooms, you don't have to worry about these things—because it is just a purely one-sided affair.

Participants may develop strong attachments to the settings of their adventures in impersonal sex. I have noted more than once that these men seem to acquire stronger sentimental attachments to the buildings in which they meet for sex than to the persons with whom they engage in it. One respondent tells the following story of his roommate's devotion to a particular restroom:

(We had been discussing the relative merits of various facilities, when I asked him: "Do you remember that old tearoom across from the park garage—the one they tore down last winter?")

Do I ever! That was the greatest place in the park. Do you know what my roommate did last Christmas, after they tore the place down? He took a wreath, sprayed it with black paint, and laid it on top of the snow—right where that corner stall had stood. . . . He was really broken up!

The walls and fixtures of these public facilities are provided by society at large, but much remains for the participants to provide for themselves. Silence in these settings is the product of years of interaction. It is a normative response to the demand for privacy without involvement, a rule that has been developed and taught. Except for solitary masturbation, sex necessitates joint action; and impersonal sex requires that this interaction be as unrevealing as possible. In a number of ways, the structure of tearoom encounters has been developed, refined, and communicated. The primary task of this book is to describe for the reader the social structure of impersonal sex, the mechanisms that make it possible.

How, then, does such an operation work? What rules govern it? What roles may people play in it? What sort of ritual sustains the action? What are the risks—to players and others—of such activity? What kinds of people find the tearooms inviting for sexual

experience, and how do they relate this behavior to the . . . of their lives? These questions remain to be answered; but, before I can reply to them, it is important for the reader to know how I found these answers. Answers become clear only when we are aware what questions were asked and how conclusions were reached.

# Chapter 2. Methods: The Sociologist as Voyeur

IN THE summer of 1965, I wrote a research paper on the subject of homosexuality. After reading the paper, my graduate adviser raised a question, the answer to which was not available from my data or from the literature on sexual deviance: "But where does the average guy go just to get a blow job? That's where you should do your research." I suspected that the answer was "to the tearooms," but this was little more than a hunch. We decided that this area of covert deviant behavior, tangential to the subculture, was one that needed study.

Stories of tearoom adventures and raids constantly pass along the homosexual grapevine. There is a great deal of talk (usually of a pejorative nature) about these facilities in gay circles. Most men with whom I had conversed at any length during my brief research admitted to "tricking" (engaging in one-time sexual relationships) in tearooms from time to time.

Sociologists had studied bar operations<sup>1</sup> and the practice of male prostitution by teen-age gang members,<sup>2</sup> but no one had tackled the scenes of impersonal sex where most arrests are made. Literature on the subject indicates that, up to now, the police and other law enforcement agents have been the only systematic observers of homosexual action in public restrooms. In some localities, these agents have been very busy with such observations. For example, of the 493 charges of felony for supposed homosexual conduct made during a recent four-year period in Los Angeles County, California, 56 per cent were against persons arrested in public restrooms.<sup>3</sup>

Social scientists have avoided this area of deviant behavior, perhaps due to the many emotional and methodological problems it presents—some of which are common to any study of a deviant population. Ethical and emotional problems, I suspect, provide the more serious obstacles for most prospective researchers. As Hooker points out, "Gaining access to secret worlds of homosexuals, and maintaining rapport while conducting an ethnographic field study, requires the development of a non-evaluative attitude toward all forms of sexual behavior."<sup>4</sup> Such an attitude, involving divorce from one's socialization, is not easy to come by. No amount of intellectual exercise alone can enable the ethnographer to make such emotional adjustments, and ethical concerns (see the Postscript for a full discussion) serve to complicate the task.

I am inclined to agree with Polsky when he says: "Most difficul-

1. In this connection, Evelyn Hooker, "The Homosexual Community," in *Personality Research* (Copenhagen: Monksgaard, 1962) is important. See also Sherri Cavan, *Liquor License: An Ethnography of Bar Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966), especially pp. 211-226.

2. Albert J. Reiss, Jr., "The Social Integration of Queers and Peers," *Social Problems*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall, 1961), pp. 102-120.

3. These arrests for felonious homosexual offenses in Los Angeles County, from 1962-64, were analyzed in Jon J. Gallo and others, "The Consenting Adult Homosexual and the Law: An Empirical Study of Enforcement and Administration in Los Angeles County," *UCLA Law Review*, 13 (March, 1966), p. 804. A number of references to public restrooms in this excellent study constitute nearly all the literature on this subject. Outside of occasional comments in gay novels and other works on the subject of homosexuality that tearooms provide "one of the known sexual outlets" for the homosexual, there is no other mention to be found.

4. Hooker, "The Homosexual Community," p. 40.

ties that one meets and solves in doing field research on criminals are simply the difficulties one meets and solves in doing field research.”<sup>5</sup> The obstructions encountered in the course of this study—insurmountable as some appeared at the time—are, for the most part, shared with other ethnographers, particularly those who take on deviant populations.

Unless one intends to study only that beleaguered, captive population, the students in our college classrooms, the first problem is one of locating subjects for research. In his study of the Negro street corner man, Elliot Liebow found that “he is no more at home to the researcher than he is to the case worker or the census taker.”<sup>6</sup> The refreshingly human account of Whyte’s “first efforts” at research in *Street Corner Society* underscores this point.<sup>7</sup> Masters and Johnson turned to prostitutes for respondents who were “knowledgeable, cooperative, and available for study” in the early stages of their investigation of human sexual response.<sup>8</sup>

As indicated in the preceding chapter, my initial problem was one of locating the more popular tearooms. Once I could find where the “action” was, I knew that potential research subjects would be involved. This is the advantage of studying a population defined only by their participation in a specific sort of interaction. To observe those involved in race track society, the scientist goes to the race tracks.<sup>9</sup> To study “homosexuals” or “schizophrenics,” however, one must first overcome the vague, stereotypical generalizations to which even social science falls victim in order to define (much less isolate and sample) the population.

This is not a study of “homosexuals” but of participants in homosexual acts. The subjects of this study have but one thing in common: each has been observed by me in the course of a homosexual act in a public park restroom. This is the activity, and these are the actors, that I set out to study in 1965. The physical traces

5. Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), p. 126.

6. Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 7.

7. William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), pp. 288–298.

8. William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), p. 10.

9. An interesting example of precisely this sort of study is Marvin B. Scott, *The Racing Game* (Chicago: Aldine, 1968).

that helped lead me to such performers and performances are discussed in Chapter 1. When a researcher is able to engage participants in conversation outside the tearooms, he may be directed to some of the more active spots of a city. In the early stages of research, however, such measures as location, surroundings, and the number of cars parked in front are very helpful in locating the more profitable places for research.

### Other Tearooms—Other Variables

There are, of course, other tearooms, not located in parks, that might have been studied. Those in the Y’s and transportation facilities have received the greatest publicity.<sup>10</sup> My study, however, has been focused upon the park facilities for two reasons. First, the latter have the greatest notoriety in the homosexual subculture. Second, I wanted to control the ecological and demographic variables as much as possible. All but two of the restrooms in which I conducted systematic observations were of the same floor plan, and all shared common environmental conditions. Of greater importance is the “democratic” nature of outdoor facilities. Parks are much more apt to draw a representative sample of the population.

In the same city, there is a well-known tearoom in a courthouse, another in a large department store, and a third in the basement of a class B movie theater. Each caters to a different clientele, is subject to different influences from the physical surroundings, and is supervised by different forces of social control. In the department store tearoom, most of the men wear neckties. Participants venture there during lunch hour from their nearby offices. This is a white collar facility, patrolled by the store’s detectives. Word has it that an apprehended offender is taken to the office of the store manager, who administers reprimands and threats and then pronounces sentence: he revokes the guilty man’s credit card! I once spent an hour counselling a distraught participant who was contemplating suicide in apprehension of what his wife might be told if she tried to charge

10. Perhaps the most famous tearoom arrest in America was that of a presidential assistant in the restroom of a Washington YMCA in 1964.

## 20 Tearoom Trade

anything at this popular store, where her husband had been caught in an act of fellatio.

Although I have made informal observations of tearoom activity in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Des Moines, Tulsa, Denver, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, the greater part of the research was concentrated in one metropolitan area. Admittedly, there are a number of factors that cast doubt on the applicability of these findings to other regions of the United States, much less to other nations and cultures.

One feature of the toilet stalls in the city where my research was concentrated constitutes an important variable: there are no doors on the stalls in the public parks. Signals from the stalls, therefore, are all of the bodily motion variety—gestures of the head or hands. One social scientist questioned an earlier paper of mine that had omitted reference to other types of signaling:

You don't say anything about men who go into a stall, close the door and then make contact with the chap in the next stall by means such as foot-tapping or passing notes. I presume that, given the layout of the restrooms you surveyed, this was not common practice, but it is certainly done widely here. As a matter of fact, the University recently removed the doors from *every other* stall in several of the larger men's rooms on campus in order to cut down on this activity.<sup>11</sup>

In tearooms where there were doors on the stalls, I *have* observed the use of foot-tapping as a means of communication. What the university authorities mentioned above apparently failed to realize, however, is that doors on the stalls serve as hindrances rather than aids to homoerotic activity. Certainly, the passing of notes would cause inconvenience and place the actor in greater jeopardy.

Other variables such as climate, availability of parks, the nature of police surveillance, amount of newspaper publicity accorded offenders, or relative popularity of other sexual outlets could result in wide variations in the volume of tearoom activity.<sup>12</sup> My conten-

11. In a letter from Martin Hoffman, M.D., School of Criminology, University of California, Berkeley, August 2, 1967.

12. For instance, informants tell me that the policy of Denver's daily newspapers to publish names, addresses, and places of employment of all men arrested on charges of homosexual behavior has caused a decrease of tearoom activity in the city—with a corresponding rise in the popularity of other homosexual outlets.

tion, however, is that the basic rules of the game—and the profile of the players—are applicable to any place in the United States.

This much may be said with certainty: there is probably no major city in the nation without its tearooms in current operation. These facilities constitute a major part of the free sex market for those in the homosexual subculture—and for millions who might never identify with the gay society. For the social scientist, these public toilets provide a means for direct observation of the dynamics of sexual encounters *in situ*; moreover, as will be seen, they facilitate the gathering of a representative sample of secret deviants, for most of whom association with the deviant subculture is minimal.

## Neatness versus Accuracy

I employed the methods described herein not because they are the most accurate in the sense of "neatness" or "cleanness" but because they promised the greatest accuracy in terms of faithfulness to people and actions as they live and happen. These are strategies that I judged to be the least obtrusive measures available—the least likely to distort the real world.

My biases are those that Bruyn attributes to the participant observer, who "is interested in people as they are, not as he thinks they ought to be according to some standard of his own."<sup>13</sup> To employ, therefore, any strategies that might distort either the activity observed or the profile of those who engage in it would be foreign to my scientific philosophy and inimical to my purposes.

Some methods, then, have grown quite naturally from the chromosomal messages of a particular "school" of sociology. Others are mutations resulting from interaction with my research environment. As obstacles developed, means were devised to circumvent them. Unusual difficulties call for unusual strategies. Although I have employed a number of "oddball measures," as they are called by Webb and his associates, these research methods

13. Severyn T. Bruyn, *The Human Perspective in Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 18.

are actually only uncommon applications of such tested measures as physical traces, the running record, and simple observation.<sup>14</sup>

My concern in this study has been with the description of a specific style of deviant behavior and of the population who engage in that activity. Beyond such systematic, descriptive analyses, I have tried to offer, in the light of deviance theory, some explanation as to why and how these people participate in the particular form of behavior described. I have not attempted to test any pre-stated hypotheses. Such an approach tends to limit sociological research to the imagery of the physical sciences. It seems to me equally valid to apply a number of measures to one population or one type of social interaction for the purpose of describing that encounter and its participants.

Hypotheses should develop *out of* such ethnographic work, rather than provide restrictions and distortions from its inception. Where my data have called for a conceptual framework, I have tried to supply it, sometimes with the help of other social scientists. In those cases where data were strong enough to generate new theoretical approaches, I have attempted to be a willing medium. The descriptive study is important, not only in obtaining objective and systematic knowledge of behavior that is either unknown or taken for granted, but in providing the groundwork for new theoretical development. If the social scientist is to move back and forth between his data and the body of social theory, the path of that movement should not be restricted to a set of predestined hypotheses.<sup>15</sup>

The research in which I engaged, from the summer of 1965 through the winter of 1967–68, may be broken down into two distinct stages, each with its subcategories. The first was an ethnographic or participant-observation stage. This part of the research extended over two years on a part-time basis (I was also involved in graduate study at the time).

The second half involved six months of full-time work in administering interview schedules to more than one hundred respondents

14. Eugene J. Webb and others, *Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966). All of these measures are described in some detail in this work.

15. For a description of theory development at its best, see C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 73.

and in attempting to interview another twenty-seven. Another year has been devoted to analysis of the resulting data.

### Preparing for the Field

As an ethnographer, my first task was to acquaint myself with the homosexual subculture. Because of my pastoral experience, I was no total stranger to those circles. While a seminarian, I was employed for two years in a parish that was known in the homosexual world as Chicago's "queen parish"—a place to which the homosexuals could turn for counsel, understanding priests, good music, and worship with an aesthetic emphasis. I soon came to know the gay parishioners and to speak their language. Seminarians who worked there called on people who lived in unbelievable squalor and in houses of prostitution, so it was nothing for us to seek the flock in gay bars as well. One of the faithful churchmen was bartender and part-time entertainer in one of the more popular spots, and he always looked after the seminarians and warned us of impending raids.

This particular part of my education was supplemented in the summer of 1953, when I spent three months in clinical training at the State University of Iowa's psychiatric hospital. This was a model institution, operated primarily for research and training purposes, and (in line with research interests of the Head of Staff) was well stocked that summer with male homosexual patients. That training provided me with a background in psychoanalytic theory regarding homosexuality.

From 1955 to 1965, I served parishes in Oklahoma, Colorado, and Kansas, twice serving as Episcopal campus chaplain on a part-time basis. Because I was considered "wise" and did not attempt to "reform" them, hundreds of homosexuals of all sorts and conditions came to me during those years for counselling. Having joined me in counselling parishioners over the coffee pot for many a night, my wife provided much understanding assistance in this area of my ministry.

The problem, at the beginning of my research, was threefold: to become acquainted with the sociological literature on sexual deviance; to gain entry to a deviant subculture in a strange city where

I no longer had pastoral, and only part-time priestly, duties; and to begin to listen to sexual deviants with a scientist's rather than a pastor's ear.

### Passing as Deviant

Like any deviant group, homosexuals have developed defenses against outsiders: secrecy about their true identity, symbolic gestures and the use of the eyes for communication, unwillingness to expose the whereabouts of their meeting places, extraordinary caution with strangers, and admission to certain places only in the company of a recognized person. Shorn of pastoral contacts and unwilling to use professional credentials, I had to enter the subculture as would any newcomer and to make contact with respondents under the guise of being another gay guy.<sup>16</sup>

Such entry is not difficult to accomplish. Almost any taxi driver can tell a customer where to find a gay bar. A guide to such gathering places<sup>17</sup> may be purchased for five dollars. The real problem is not one of making contact with the subculture but of making the contact "stick." Acceptance does not come easy, and it is extremely difficult to move beyond superficial contact in public places to acceptance by the group and invitations to private and semiprivate parties. This problem has been well expressed by a team engaged in homosexual research at the University of Michigan:

An outsider—be he a novice deviant, police officer, or sociologist—finds it necessary to cope with a kind of double closure one confronts around many kinds of subcultural deviance; to wit, one may gain entrance into the deviant enterprise only if he has had previous connection with it, but he can gain such connections only if he has them.<sup>18</sup>

16. My reticence at admitting I was a sociologist resulted, in part, from the cautioning of a gay friend who warned me that homosexuals in the community are particularly wary of sociologists. This is supposedly the result of the failure of a graduate student at another university to disguise the names of bars and respondents in a master's thesis on this subject.

17. *Guild Guide* (Washington: Guild Press, 1968).

18. Donald J. Black and Maureen A. Mileski, "Passing as Deviant: Methodological Problems and Tactics," unpublished working paper available through the Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, pp. 4-5.

On one occasion, for instance, tickets to an after-hours party were sold to the man next to me at a bar. When I asked to buy one, I was told that they were "full up." Following the tip of another customer, I showed up anyway and walked right in. No one questioned my being there. Since my purpose at this point of the field study was simply to "get the feel" of the deviant community rather than to study methods of penetrating its boundaries, I finally tired of the long method and told a friendly potential respondent who I was and what I was doing. He then got me invited to cocktail parties before the annual "drag ball," and my survey of the subculture neared completion.

During those first months, I made the rounds of ten gay bars then operating in the metropolitan area, attended private gatherings and the annual ball, covered the scene where male prostitutes operate out of a coffee house, observed pick-up operations in the parks and streets, and had dozens of informal interviews with participants in the gay society. I also visited the locales where "instant sex" was to be had: the local bathhouse, certain movie theaters, and the tearooms.

From the beginning, my decision was to continue the practice of the field study in passing as deviant. Although this raises questions of scientific ethics, which will be dealt with later, there are good reasons for following this method of participant observation.

In the first place, I am convinced that there is only *one* way to watch highly discreditable behavior and that is to pretend to be in the same boat with those engaging in it. To wear a button that says "I Am a Watchbird, Watching You" into a tearoom, would instantly eliminate all action except the flushing of toilets and the exiting of all present. Polsky has done excellent observation of pool hustlers because he is experienced and welcome in their game. He is accepted as one of them. He might also do well, as he suggests, in interviewing a jewel thief or a fence in his tavern hangout. But it should be noted that he does not propose watching them steal, whereas my research required observation of criminal acts.<sup>19</sup>

The second reason is to prevent distortion. Hypothetically, let us assume that a few men could be found to continue their sexual

19. Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, p. 127.

activity while under observation. How "normal" could that activity be? How could the researcher separate the "show" and the "cover" from standard procedures of the encounter? Masters and Johnson might gather clinical data in a clinical setting without distortion, but a stage is a suitable research site only for those who wish to study the "onstage" behavior of actors.

### Serving as Watchqueen

In *Unobtrusive Measures*, the authors refer to the participant observation method as one of "simple observation."<sup>20</sup> This is something of a misnomer for the study of sexually deviant behavior. Observation of the tearoom encounters—far from being simple—became, at some stages of the research, almost impossibly complex.

Observation is made doubly difficult when the observer is an object of suspicion. Any man who remains in a public washroom for more than five minutes is apt to be either a member of the vice squad or someone on the make. As yet, he is not suspected as being a social scientist. The researcher, concerned as he is in uncovering information, is unavoidably at variance with the secretive interests of the deviant population. Because his behavior is both criminal<sup>21</sup> and the object of much social derision, the tearoom customer is exceptionally sensitive to the intrusion of all strangers.

Bruyn points out three difficulties attendant to participant observation: "how to become a natural part of the life of the observed," "how to maintain scientific integrity," and "problems of ethical integrity."<sup>22</sup> Each of these problems is intensified in the observation of homosexual activity. When the focus of an encounter is specifically sexual, it is very difficult for the observer to take a

20. Webb and others, *Unobtrusive Measures*, p. 49.

21. The Revised Statutes of the state under study, for instance, read on this wise: H563.230. *The abominable and detestable crime against nature—penalty.*—Every person who shall be convicted of the detestable and abominable crime against nature, committed with mankind or with beast, with the sexual organs or with the mouth, shall be punished by imprisonment in the penitentiary not less than two years.

22. Bruyn, *Human Perspective*

"natural part" in the action without actual involvement of a sexual nature. Such involvement would, of course, raise serious questions of both scientific and ethical integrity on his part. His central problem, then, is one of maintaining both objectivity and participation (the old theological question of how to be *in*, but not *of*, the world).

In their excellent and comprehensive paper on the subject of passing as deviant, Black and Mileski outline ways "by which the social organization itself can be mobilized by the investigator in the interests of his research."<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, this paper had not been written when I needed it; nevertheless, my preliminary observations of tearoom encounters led to the discovery of an essential strategy—the real methodological breakthrough of this research—that involved such mobilization of the social organization being observed.

The very fear and suspicion encountered in the restrooms produces a participant role, the sexuality of which is optional. This is the role of the lookout ("watchqueen" in the argot), a man who is situated at the door or windows from which he may observe the means of access to the restroom. When someone approaches, he coughs. He nods when the coast is clear or if he recognizes an entering party as a regular.

The lookouts fall into three main types. The most common of these are the "waiters," men who are waiting for someone with whom they have made an appointment or whom they expect to find at this spot, for a particular type of "trick," or for a chance to get in on the action. The others are the masturbaters, who engage in autoerotic behavior (either overtly or beneath their clothing) while observing sexual acts, and the voyeurs, who appear to derive sexual stimulation and pleasure from watching the others. Waiters sometimes masturbate while waiting—and I have no evidence to prove some are not also voyeurs. The point is that the primary purpose of their presence differs from that of the pure masturbater or voyeur: the waiters expect to become players. In a sense, the masturbaters are all voyeurs, while the reverse is not true.

In terms of appearances, I assumed the role of the voyeur—a

23. Black and Mileski, "Passing as Deviant," p. 2.

role superbly suited for sociologists and the only lookout role that is not overtly sexual. On those occasions when there was only one other man present in the room, I have taken a role that is even less sexual than that of the voyeur-lookout: the straight person who has come to the facility for purposes of elimination. Although it avoids sexual pressure, this role is problematic for the researcher: it is short-lived and invariably disrupts the action he has set out to observe. (See Chapter 3 for discussion of this role and others.)

Before being alerted to the role of lookout by a cooperating respondent, I tried first the role of the straight and then that of the waiter. As the former, I disrupted the action and frustrated my research. As the latter—glancing at my watch and pacing nervously from window to door to peer out—I could not stay long without being invited to enter the action and could only make furtive observation of the encounters. As it was, the waiter and voyeur roles are subject to blurring and I was often mistaken for the former.

By serving as a voyeur-lookout, I was able to move around the room at will, from window to window, and to observe all that went on without alarming my respondents or otherwise disturbing the action. I found this role much more amenable and profitable than the limited roles assumed in the earlier stages of research. Not only has being a watchqueen enabled me to gather data on the behavioral patterns, it has facilitated the linking of participants in homosexual acts with particular automobiles.

During the first year of observations—from April of 1966 to April 1967—my field research notes were made with the aid of a portable tape recorder, concealed under a pasteboard carton on the front seat of my automobile. Research efforts during this time were directed toward comprehensiveness. I attempted to survey all of the active tearooms in one city and to extend my observations, whenever possible, to other communities across the country. My concern was to observe the activity across a representative range of times and places.

The park restrooms first become active as sexual outlets between 7:30 and 8:30 A.M., when the park attendants arrive to unlock them. The early customers are men who meet on their way to work. After 9:00, the activity drops off sharply until lunch time. During

the first two hours of the afternoon, there is another abrupt increase in activity from those who spend their lunch breaks in the park, followed by a leveling-off until about 4:00 P.M. From this time until about 7:00 in the evening, the great bulk of tearoom participants arrive. Most participants stop off in the park restrooms while driving home from work. As one respondent stated, he tries to make it to a tearoom “nearly every evening about 5:30 for a quick job on the way home.”

A few of these facilities remain open until as late as 9:00 P.M., but most are locked up by 7:30. On Saturdays and Sundays, the over-all volume of activity is much greater, reaching its peak between 4:00 and 4:30 P.M. I have observed a drop in tearoom action on the weekends immediately after lunch time, a period that coincides with the greatest amount of picnic activity. Otherwise, the curve is roughly bell-shaped, rising to the late afternoon peak. There are, of course, variations in these patterns from park to park and during different seasons of the year. The “hunting season” is described in Chapter 1, but I estimate that the months of greatest sexual volume in the park restrooms are from July through October.

My interest, then, was in distributing observation time throughout these periods of varying activity—and in different parks and different seasons. In all, during this first year, I observed some 120 sexual acts in nineteen different men’s rooms in five parks of the one city. Not including the time spent outdoors, in driving, or engaged in informal interviews with participants, I spent close to sixty hours in the tearooms in this first stage of the observations. This time was broken into segments of an hour or less (averaging about twenty minutes), between which periods I drove to other tearooms or parks, sat in my automobile, talked with the few men I could involve in conversations outdoors, or simply stood outside.

This excerpt from one of the tapes I made in October, 1966, may communicate to the reader an idea of my observational techniques at that stage of the research:

I was in this facility about five minutes, during that time the Negro in his thirties, neatly dressed, who had the [Ford], stood constantly at the urinal and masturbated, making no attempt to hide what he was doing. There was a young Negro in there at the same time—very neat, very

well dressed, in his late teens I would gather—with glasses, student type. He stood at the window throughout the time and said nothing. I stood near him at the window, and he made no approach. I went to the other window, and he made no move. As I was leaving, the man from the white Chevrolet left his car and went in. . . . Now, as I describe the two Negroes, I know the one man was alone in his car. The younger man obviously came on foot to this facility. All right, on to some other places. It is now 4:47, traffic is very heavy, much distraction. . . . I'm now approaching the facility again and there's not much point going there, because there are no cars out front—so I'll move on to Hillside.

My purpose in this "time and place sampling" was to avoid the research errors outlined by Webb and others—particularly the danger "that the timing of the data collection may be such that a selective population periodically appears before the observer, while another population, equally periodically, engages in the same behavior, but comes along only when the observer is absent. Similarly, the individual's behavior may shift as the hours or days of the week change."<sup>24</sup>

### Sampling Covert Deviants

Hooker has noted that homosexuals who lead secret lives are usually available for study "only when caught by law enforcement agents, or when seeking psychiatric help."<sup>25</sup> To my knowledge, no one has yet attempted to acquire a *representative* sample of *covert* deviants for any sort of research. Polsky's efforts to secure a representative sample of "beats," in order to effect a survey of drug use among them, is a possible exception to this generalization, although I question that Village beats could be called *covert* deviants.

Following Rainwater's suggestion, I gathered a sample of the tearoom participants by tracing the license plates of the autos they drive to the parks. I have already indicated ways in which automobiles provide observable traces of their drivers' movements (see Chapter 1). Operation of one's car is a form of self-presentation that tells the observant sociologist a great deal about the operator.

24. Webb and others, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

25. Hooker, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

For several months, I had noted fluctuations in the number of automobiles that remained more than fifteen minutes in front of the sampled tearooms. My observations had indicated that, with the sole exception of police cars, autos that parked in front of these public restrooms (which, as has been mentioned, are usually isolated from other park facilities) for a quarter of an hour or more invariably belonged to participants in the homosexual encounters. The same is true for cars that appeared in front of two or more such facilities in the course of an hour.

These variations in frequency were recorded for half-hour periods from 11:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M., each day of the week, for each of four parks observed during the summer months. Averages of these volumes were calculated for each thirty-minute time period, the weekdays and weekends being separated for control purposes. Although the original calculations were made separately for each park, no major differences were observed in the over-all traffic pattern thus recorded. These data were then collapsed into the graphs that appear as Figures 2.1 and 2.2.

In September of 1966, then, I set about to gather a sample in as systematic a manner as possible under the circumstances. With the help of the tape recorder, I took the license numbers of as many cars during each half-hour period as equalled approximately 10 per cent of the average volume of "likely" autos at that time on that day of the week. At least for the largest park (which represents roughly half of the observed homosexual activity of this sort in the city), the results were fairly representative on a time basis. Random selection cannot be claimed for this sample: because of the pressures of time and possible detection, I was able to record only a portion of the license plates of participating men I saw at any one time, the choice of which to record being determined by the volume and flow of traffic and the position in which the autos were parked.

I also noted, whenever possible, a brief description of both the car and its driver. By means of frequent sorties into the tearooms for observation, each recorded license number was verified as belonging to a man actually observed in homosexual activity inside the facilities. Sometimes the numbers were taped prior to my entrance, in anticipation of what I would find inside. In most cases, however, I observed the activity, left the tearoom, waited in my car

Figure 2.1

*Illustrating Volume of Autos Observed at Restrooms and Sampling Method (Averaged from Data Gathered on Weekdays)*

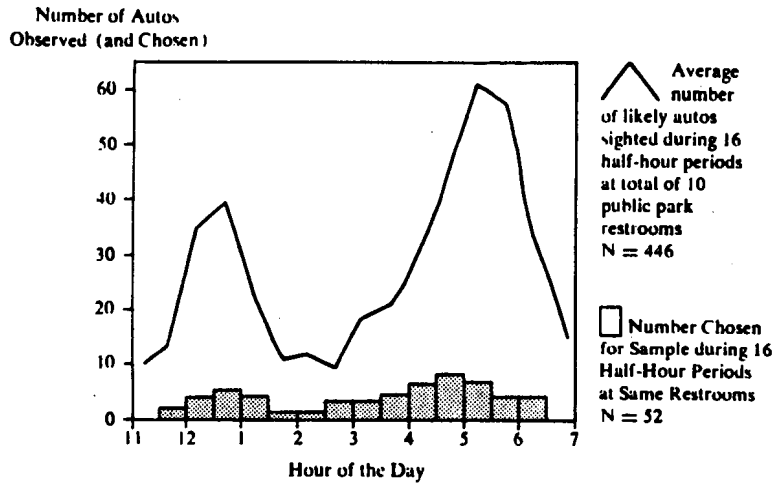
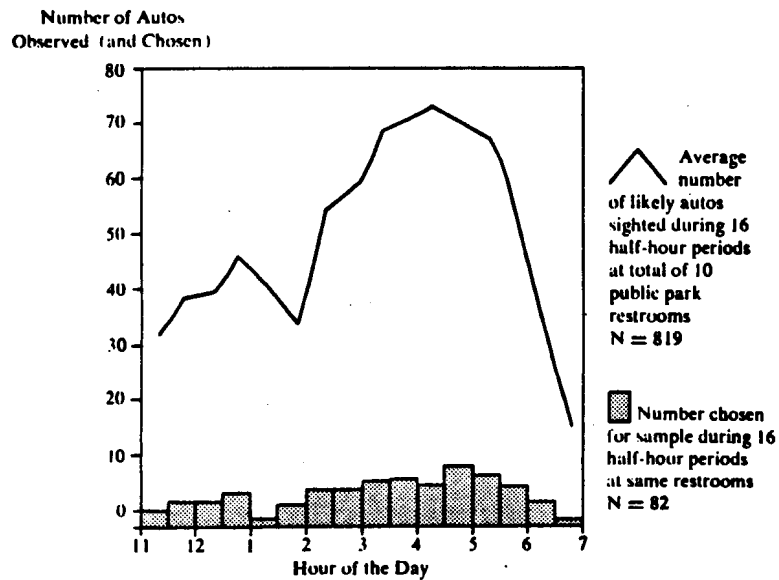


Figure 2.2

*Illustrating Volume of Autos Observed at Restrooms and Sampling Method (Averaged from Data Gathered on Weekends)*



for the participants to enter their autos—then recorded the plate numbers and brief descriptions. For each of these men but one I added to the data the role he took in the sexual encounter.

The original sample thus gained was of 134 license numbers, carefully linked to persons involved in the homosexual encounters, gathered from the environs of ten public restrooms in four different parks of a metropolitan area of two million people. With attrition and additions that will be described later, one hundred participants in the tearoom game were included in the final sample.

### Systematic Observation

Before leaving the account of my observation strategies to consider the archival measures employed during the first half of my research, I want to describe the techniques employed in “tightening up” my data. Following the preliminary observations, I developed a “Systematic Observation Sheet” on which to record my observations. This form—used by myself in describing fifty encounters and by a cooperating participant in the recording of thirty others—helped to assure consistent and thorough recording of the observed encounters.

Figure 2.3 is a reproduction of an actual Systematic Observation Sheet, as filled out by me immediately upon return to my office one summer afternoon. Only the date, place, and description of an auto have been blanked out in order to avoid incrimination. This was the first, and briefest, of a series of three successive encounters observed in that popular restroom in the course of thirty-five minutes. After they were concluded, I drove to another part of the park and, with the use of a clipboard, filled in the diagrams and made written notes. As a left-hander, I find writing difficult; so I waited until I could use a typewriter to add the running commentary at the bottom.

As may be seen, this report sheet includes places for recording the time and place involved; a description of the participants (their age, attire, auto, and role in the encounter); a description of weather and other environmental conditions; a diagram on which movements of the participants could be plotted, along with location of

the places of contract and fellatio; as well as a complete description of the progress of the encounters and reactions of the observer.

Such care was taken for several reasons. My first concern has been for objective validity—to avoid distortion of the data either by my presence or my presuppositions. I have also desired to make future replications and comparative studies possible, by being as systematic as possible in recording and gathering data.

Finally, I wanted to make the best of a rather unique opportunity for participant observation. The tearooms are challenging, not only because they present unusual problems for the researcher but because they provide an extraordinary opportunity for detailed observation. Due to the lack of verbal communication and the consistency of the physical settings, a type of laboratory is provided by these facilities—one in which human behavior may be observed with the control of a number of variables.

The analysis of the encounters that follows in Chapters 3 and 4 is based, primarily, on the fifty systematic observations I made between March and August, 1967. The numerous informal observations I made previously—and the thirty systematic observations made by a cooperating respondent—have served mainly as checks against this systematic portion of my research. Although I can think of no way in which my earlier observations run counter to these detailed ones, their greatest value was as preparation for this stage of the participant observation. Those of the respondent were also in general agreement with mine. Perhaps because he was frequently a sexual participant in the encounters he observed, however, he tended to concentrate more on the details of the sexual acts and less on the interaction leading to them. It is also interesting to note that his estimate of the age of participants was lower than mine. It is not possible to say whether this discrepancy resulted from a tendency on his part to view others as potential sexual partners or from a parallel difference in our own ages. Anyway, it is doubtful that the populations we observed differed greatly.

Figure 2.3

SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION SHEET

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Day: Sat

O = Observer (1) (2) General Conditions: Weather & temp. 80° - partly cloudy - beautiful

X = Principal Aggressor # & type of people in parks: middle-aged, few children, some engaged in sports

Y = Principal Passive Participant est. volume of gay activity: heavy - 8 or 25 minutes

A - N = Other Participants Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Z = Law Enforcement Personnel

Time Began: 3:20 (Encounter A)

Time Ended: 3:30

Participants: [include symbol, est. age, attire, other distinguishing characteristics, type of auto driven]

X: 40 - black hair - pants & shoes - park  
jean shirt - travel

Y: 75 - balding - tall, dark pants,  
blue & white checkered shirt -  
walk, jeant shirt

Others: A - 20 - Myer, Tan shirt -  
walk, jeant shirt

⊙ = Fellatio performed  
 ⊗ = Contract made

Description of Action: [note: when possible, indicate: delays in autos, etc., before entering tearoom...manner of approaches...types of sexual roles taken... nature of interruptions and reaction to them...ANYTHING WHICH MAY BE SPOKEN... any masturbation going on...actions of lookout(s)...REACTION TO TEENAGERS AND ANY PARTICIPATION BY THEM...reactions to observer...length of time of sexual acts...spitting, washing of hands, wiping, etc.]

X was standing at right window & A seated on stool when O entered. O went to first urinal. X moved into third urinal, unzipped pants but did not urinate. He began to look at me. I slipped pants and moved in front of left window. X went back to opposite window. I saw Y get out of car and approach tearoom. He went to third urinal as soon as entered. In about 2 minutes, X moved into center urinal and began to cruise Y. By then, Y had an erection - X reached over and began to masturbate him with right hand, himself with left. I moved over to the far window. A looked at me. I smiled and nodded. X and Y walked together to stall # 1. X lowered pants and sat down. Y, standing in front with pants still unzipped and erection showing, continued to masturbate for another minute, then he inserted penis in X's mouth. He reached climax in about 3 minutes, having clasped hands behind X's neck. He then went to basin, washed hands & left.

## The Talk Outside

A sociologist without verbal communication is like a doctor without a stethoscope. The silence of these sexual encounters confounded such research problems as legitimation of the observer and identification of roles. As indicated above, however, it has certain advantages in limiting the number of variables that must be observed, recorded, and evaluated. When action alone is being observed and analyzed, the patterns of behavior themselves acquire meaning independent of verbalization. "The method of participant observation," Bruyn states, "is a research procedure which can provide the basis for establishing adequacy at the level of meaning."<sup>26</sup> What verbal research is possible through outside interviews then becomes an independent means of verifying the observations.

Despite the almost inviolate silence within the restroom setting, tearoom participants are neither mute nor particularly taciturn. Away from the scenes where their sexual deviance is exposed—outside what I shall later discuss as the "interaction membrane"—conversation is again possible. Once my car and face had become familiar, I was able to enter into verbal relationships with twelve of the participants, whom I refer to as the "intensive dozen." Eight of these men are included in the final sample. Four others, although engaged in dialogue near the tearooms where I observed them, were not included in the sample. Of the eight in the sample, five (including the two "walkers," who had walked rather than driven to the tearooms) were contacted after leaving the scene of an encounter, and three became cooperating respondents as a result of relationships that developed from the formal interviews.

After the initial contacts with this intensive dozen, I told them of my research, disclosing my real purpose for being in the tearooms. With the help of some meals together and a number of drinks, all agreed to cooperate in subsequent interviewing sessions. A few of these interviews were taped (only two men were sufficiently unafraid to allow their voices to be recorded on tape—and I don't blame the others) but most were later reconstructed from notes.

26. Bruyn, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

Apart from the systematic observations themselves, these conversations constitute the richest source of data in the study.

Some may ask why, if nine of these cooperating respondents were obtained without the formal interviews, I bothered with the seemingly endless task of acquiring a sample and administering questionnaires—particularly when interviews with the intensive dozen provided such depth to the data. The answer is simple: these men are not representative of the tearoom population. I could engage them in conversation only because they are more overt, less defensive, and better educated than the average participant.

This suggests a problem for all research that relies on willing respondents. Their very willingness to cooperate sets them apart from those they are meant to represent. *Tally's Corner* and *Street Corner Society* stand high among the classics of social science—and rightly so—but I wonder sometimes how well Tally and Doc represent the apathetic, alienated, uninvolved men of the street corners. When authors such as Liebow and Whyte strive to compensate for this by extending their research throughout the friendship networks, great ethnography results. But the saddest works in the name of social science are those that barrage the reader with endless individual case studies and small samples from private psychiatric practices, few of which can be representative of the vast numbers of human beings who are supposed to be "understood" in terms of these deviant deviants.

## Archival Evidence

The unobtrusive measures of participant observation and physical traces, combined with a limited use of open-ended interviews for purposes of correction and validation, enabled me to describe the previously unexplored area of tearoom encounters. The preliminary description of the participant population, however, began only after the establishment of a verified sample. For this stage of the study, I turned to archival measures, "the running record."<sup>27</sup>

Identification of the sample was made by using the automobile

27. Webb and others, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–87.

If one may disregard for a moment the strong possibility that most of these exclusions may have resulted from errors on the part of clerks, printers, or myself, one other factor may be hidden behind these omissions. Is it not possible that some of these unidentifiable plates may have been switched, counterfeited, or acquired by other illegitimate means? Some men might have leased cars or given false addresses in order to preserve their anonymity. I know of no unobtrusive way to test the degree of deliberate deception. If deception were the motive in these instances, it was successful.

### A View from the Streets

Like archives, park restrooms, and automobiles, the streets of our cities are subject to public regulation and scrutiny. They are thus good places for nonreactive research (nonreactive in that it requires no response from the research subjects). Having gained addresses for every person in my sample, I spent a Christmas vacation on the streets and highways. By recording a description of every residence and neighborhood represented in the sample, I was able to gain further data on my research subjects.

The first purpose of this survey of homes was to acquire descriptions of the house types and dwelling areas that, when combined with occupational data gleaned from the archives, would enable me to use Warner's Index of Status Characteristics (I. S. C.) for a socioeconomic profile of my population.<sup>29</sup> Generally speaking, this attempt was not successful: job classifications were too vague and large city housing units too difficult to rank by Warner's criteria.

As physical evidence, however, homes provide a source of data about a population that outweighs any failure they may have as a status index. Swing sets and bicycles in the yards indicate that a family is not childless. A shrine to Saint Mary suggests that the resident is Roman Catholic in religious identification. Christmas decorations bespeak at least a nominal Christian preference. A boat

29. See W. Lloyd Warner and others, *Social Class in America* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1949).

or trailer in the driveway suggests love of the outdoor life. "For Rent" signs may indicate the size of an average apartment and, in some cases, the price. The most important sign, however, was the relative "neatness" of the house and grounds. Some implications of this information are pointed out in Chapter 7.

### Obtrusive Measures

Realizing that the majority of my participant sample were married—and nearly all of them quite secretive about their deviant activity—I was faced with the problem of how to interview more than the nine willing respondents. Formal interviews of the sample were part of the original research design. The little I knew about these covert deviants made me want to know a great deal more. Here was a unique population just waiting to be studied—but I had no way to approach them. Clearly, I could not knock on the door of a suburban residence and say, "Excuse me, I saw you engaging in a homosexual act in a tearoom last year, and I wonder if I might ask you a few questions." Having already been jailed, locked in a restroom, and attacked by a group of ruffians, I had no desire to conclude my research with a series of beatings.

Perhaps I might have had some success by contacting these men at their work, granted that I could obtain their business addresses. This strategy would have precluded the possibility of seeing their homes and meeting their wives, however, and I believed these confrontations to be important.

About this time, fortunately, I was asked to develop a questionnaire for a social health survey of men in the community, which was being conducted by a research center with which I had been a research associate. Based on such interview schedules already in use in Michigan and New York, the product would provide nearly all the information I would want on the men in my sample: family background, socioeconomic factors, personal health and social histories, religious and employment data, a few questions on social and political attitudes, a survey of friendship networks, and information on marital relationships and sex.

With the permission of the director of the research project, I

license registers of the states in which my respondents lived. Fortunately, friendly policemen gave me access to the license registers, without asking to see the numbers or becoming too inquisitive about the type of "market research" in which I was engaged. These registers provided the names and addresses of those in the sample, as well as the brand name and year of the automobiles thus registered. The make of the car, as recorded in the registers, was checked against my transcribed description of each car. In the two cases where these descriptions were contradictory, the numbers were rejected from the sample. Names and addresses were then checked in the directories of the metropolitan area, from which volumes I also acquired marital and occupational data for most of the sample.

Geographic mobility and data gaps plague the researcher who attempts to use the city directory as a source of information. Fortunately, however, new directories had been issued just prior to my need for them. Somewhat to my surprise, I had another advantage due to residential stability on the part of the population under study. Only 17 per cent of the men in the sample were not listed in these directories. Occupational data were not given for 37 per cent of the men (including those not in the directories).

In those few cases where addresses in license registers did not correspond with those in the city and county directories, I took advantage of still another archival source: the telephone company's index of numbers by street addresses, which had been published more recently than either of the other archival sources. By the time my sample had been verified and identified, none of the archival measures employed was over a year old, and the most recent had been published only the week before completion of this stage of the research.<sup>28</sup>

For fear of eliminating variables that might profitably be studied at a later date, I did not scrub from my sample those for whom the archives provided no marital or occupational data. These men, I

28. Because identification of the city in which this research was conducted might result in pressure being brought to bear on law enforcement agencies or respondents, it has been necessary for me to omit references to the archival volumes used. The name of the city, county, or state appears in the title of each of these sources.

felt, might represent either a transient or secretive portion of tearoom participants, the exclusion of which would have distorted the population.

Other biases were not avoidable; however, where possible, I have attempted to compensate for them. In the first place, I did not record the license numbers of automobiles from states not represented in the metropolitan area. My estimate is that about 5 per cent of the cars driven by participants in these homosexual encounters bore such out-of-state plates. The majority of these autos also had stickers that identified the owners as armed forces personnel from nearby military installations. This fact is important for indicating (a) that a very small percentage of the participants are tourists or salesmen who travel from a great distance, and (b) that the military should have a larger representation in my sample than the 2 per cent indicated by the available occupational data. If the archives and local license plates are biased against any one segment of the population, it is members of the armed forces. When compensation for this bias has been made, the indications (including those gained from interviews) are that some 10 per cent of tearoom participants will be armed forces personnel. This factor, however, should vary with the proximity of parks to large military installations. There are no such bases within a twenty-mile radius of the parks in this study.

Other license numbers were excluded from the sample because they precluded research. Because these may have produced a bias, they will be mentioned. First, eighteen were eliminated because they were not listed in the license registers. (The police attribute such gaps in their data to clerical error.) Seven men resided outside the metropolitan area under study. Another five were driving leased or company cars. For two, the automobile description in the registers did not fit my description. Finally, the license registers listed two nonexistent addresses. Other adjustments were made before I reached the final sample of 100. Two men were dropped from the sample for identity reasons. To replace them, I added two young men who had walked to the tearooms and were included in my intensive dozen. I had estimated that a small percentage of the participants walked to their favorite tearooms and thought it important to have representation from the pedestrian population.

added my deviant sample to the over-all sample of the survey, making certain that only one trusted, mature graduate student and I made all the interviews of my respondents. Thus legitimized, we set out to interview. Using a table of random numbers, I randomized my sample, so that its representativeness would not be lost in the event that we should be unable to complete all 100 interviews.

More will be written later of the measures taken to safeguard respondents; the important thing to note here is that none of the respondents was threatened by the interviews. My master list was kept in a safe-deposit box. Each interview card, kept under lock and key, was destroyed with completion of the schedule. No names or other identifying tags were allowed to appear on the questionnaires. Although I recognized each of the men interviewed from observation of them in the tearrooms, there was no indication that they remembered me. I was careful to change my appearance, dress, and automobile from the days when I had passed as deviant. I also allowed at least a year's time to lapse between the original sampling procedure and the interviews.

This strategy was most important—both from the standpoint of research validity and ethics—because it enabled me to approach my respondents as normal people, answering normal questions, as part of a normal survey. They *are* part of a larger sample. Their being interviewed is not stigmatizing, because they comprise but a small portion of a much larger sample of the population in their area. They were not put on the spot about their deviance, because they were not interviewed as deviants.

The attrition rate for these interviews was high, but not discouragingly so. Attempts were made at securing seventy-five interviews, fifty of which were completed. Thirty-five per cent were lost by attrition, including 13 per cent who refused to cooperate in the interviews. In addition to the fifty completed schedules, three fathers of participants consented to interviews on the social health survey, as did two fathers of the control sample.

Because of the preinterview data obtained by the archival and observational research previously described, it was possible to learn a great deal even from the losses. As should be expected, the residue of men with whom interviews were completed are slightly overrepresentative of the middle and upper classes; they are subur-

banites, more highly educated men. Those who were lost represent a more transient group (the most common reason for loss was that the subject had moved and left no forwarding address), employed in manual jobs. From preinterview information it was learned that the largest single occupational class in the sample was the truck drivers. Only two members of this class remained among those interviewed.

The refusals also indicated some biases. These men, when pinpointed on a map, clustered around the Italian and working class German areas of the city. Of the ten lost in this manner, three had Italian names and five bore names of distinctly Germanic origin.

Once these interviews were completed, preparations could be made for the final step of the research design. From names appearing in the randomly selected sample of the over-all social health survey, fifty men were selected, matched with the completed questionnaires on the following four characteristics: I. S. C. occupational category, race, area of the metropolitan region in which the party resided, and marital status. The loss here was not from refusals or lost addresses but from those who, when interviewed, failed to correspond with the expected characteristics for matching. Our procedure, in those cases, was simply to move on to another name in the larger sample.

These last fifty interviews, then, enabled me to compare characteristics of two samples—one deviant, one control—matched on the basis of certain socioeconomic characteristics, race, and marital status. Although I made a large proportion of these interviews, and nearly all of the deviant interviews, I found it necessary to hire and train two graduate students to assist with interviewing the control sample. A meeting was held with the assistant interviewers immediately following the completion of each schedule—and all coding of the questionnaires was done by us in conference.

There were a number of open-ended questions in the interview schedules, but the majority included a wide range of precoded answers, for the sake of ease in interviewing and economy in analysis. In addition, the interviewers were trained to make copious marginal notes and required to submit a postinterview questionnaire with each schedule. The median time required for administering the interview schedules did not differ greatly between the two samples:

one hour for the deviants, fifty-five minutes for the "straights." Even the days of the week when respondents were interviewed showed little variation between the two samples: Sunday, Tuesday, and Saturday, in that order, being the more popular days.

### Summary

From a methodological standpoint, the value of this research is that it has employed a variety of methods, each testing a different outcropping of the research population and their sexual encounters. It has united the systematic use of participant observation strategies with other nonreactive measures such as physical traces and archives. The exigencies of research in a socially sensitive area demanded such approaches; and the application of unobtrusive measures yielded data that call, in turn, for reactive methods.

Research strategies do not develop *ex nihilo*. In part, they are the outgrowth of the researcher's basic assumptions. Special conditions of the research problem itself also exercise a determining influence upon the methods used. This chapter has been an attempt to indicate how my ethnographic assumptions, coupled with the difficulties inhering in the study of covert deviants and their behavior, have given rise to a set of strategies.

With the help of "oddball" measures, the outlines of the portrait of participants in the homosexual encounters of the tearooms appeared. Reactive strategies were needed to fill in the distinguishing features. They are human, socially patterned features; and it is doubtful that any one method could have given them the expressive description they deserve.

## Chapter 3. Rules and Roles

Well, let's start off with one fellow in there—just all by his lonesome—he's the only one in there, and he is standing at the window, watching. He sees somebody at the water fountain first. He sees them coming up; he sees what they look like; he's got a few seconds. He scoots around to the urinal; and he usually stands at one of the two ends—not in the middle, one of the two ends—and this is the strange thing about it.<sup>1</sup>

WHAT IS described here is the beginning of a human encounter both problematic and consequential: problematic because it involves decision making, the choice of strategies; consequential, not only because it may conclude with a sexual payoff but because this payoff has the capacity "to flow beyond the bounds of the occasion in which it is delivered and to influence objectively the later life of the bettor."<sup>2</sup> The players are about to engage in a game of chance,

1. From a taped interview with a cooperating respondent.

2. Throughout this chapter, Erving Goffman's writings on face-to-face interaction have provided me with vocabulary and an approach to conceptualization. Because in many ways I take leave from his systematic presentations, he is not to be held responsible for the conclusions I have reached. For the context of this quotation, see his *Interaction Ritual* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), pp. 159–160.